

# One Spring Saturday: A Day of Reconciliation

April 24, 1965:

The Day the Southeast Conference of the UCC Was Born

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A stately but aging church building sitting on the northeast corner of a busy intersection in downtown Atlanta on a weekend afternoon in April would have been one of the last places imaginable for one of the more tenuous, and thus remarkable, though little-known, stories of racial reconciliation in the South. Not just the setting made it unlikely, being in the then-solidly racially white northeastern quadrant of the city, but the decades that preceded it made the event's possibility even more remote than at first glance. While most Americans were going about their usual Saturday rounds of chores and pleasures, with church not on their minds until the next morning when the time came to round up their children for Sunday School, within the walls of this edifice something of a revolution was occurring. Not quite of the kind then embroiling and forever changing the South with emotion and clergy-driven activism on behalf of political and economic civil rights, as for instance had happened in the Black Belt of South Alabama some weeks earlier, but rather something all the more extraordinary, due to its quietness and its instigation by *Southern white* Christians. A body of churches in the Deep South, situated in the heartland of the most intense resistance to racial integration of any kind, secular or religious, *voluntarily* entered into an agreement to take into its bounds churches from a segregated judicatory within the same denomination.

On that Saturday, April 24, 1965, the **Southeast Convention of the Congregational Christian Churches** (SECNV), previously all white in composition, voted to bring in 23 all-or-mostly-black congregations from the **Convention of the South** (CS), the United Church of Christ's, and before it the Congregational Christian Churches', segregated judicatory that had long been an embarrassment to the overwhelming majority of the faithful. Thrown in, and somewhat lost and neglected in all the heated discussion and argument, were four scattered congregations in Alabama and Tennessee founded by German and Swiss immigrants that had affiliated for years with the Evangelical and Reformed **South Indiana Synod**. But no one objected to their presence. The CS, though, was quite another matter.

Even though the denomination clearly put pressure on the Convention to get this done, due to the self-governing nature of all levels of the denomination, the SECNV could have easily refused and caused a major crisis for the UCC that would have required national intervention, possibly shattering cherished commitments to autonomy and self-reliance. But instead, a new body was miraculously born, the **Southeast Conference of the United Church of Christ** (SEC), the last one of the 39 original to take shape, terminating a process of aligning and

merging the mid-level bodies of the two communions uniting to become the UCC, the Congregational Christian conferences and the Evangelical and Reformed synods.

The CS was the result of decades of dreams and efforts by African-American pastors and laypeople to govern themselves after generations of tutelage by the likes of the American Missionary Association. There was not only controversy involved with a large portion of the SECNV churches stoutly opposing this measure, seen by them as further Yankee meddling in the distinctive Southern way of life that many believed sanctioned explicitly by God Almighty. In fact, an ironically bittersweet edge emerged, as the CS was barely in its adolescence, dating back only to 1950. The decision of the clergy and churches to sacrifice their recently-won independence and unity was truly a witness unto itself of God's reconciling grace, overcoming doubts and hesitance within their ranks.

Eerily similar to this was the SECNV's fledgling nature also, it only being a year older than the CS. Except for the site of the vote, Central Congregational Church, and maybe the two churches named Pilgrim in Chattanooga, Tennessee and Birmingham, Alabama, all the SECNV's congregations were typically small in membership and physical facilities, whether located in city centers, new suburban developments, or most commonly, in the open countryside, situated in cotton fields and cattle pastures of Alabama and Georgia. With only a few exceptions in the cities, the SECNV's churches were most unlike their cousins in New England, North Carolina, the Great Lakes, or the Pacific Northwest, with many having worship less frequently than each Sunday, preachers who had no opportunity to get a formal theological education, and a theology and lifestyle more reminiscent of 19th-century farm life than the rapid urbanization of the mid-20th century. By contrast, the CS' churches mostly grew up alongside schools in generations past, and, if anything, probably valued the distinct ethos of Congregationalism more intensely than the faithful in the tradition's Northern heartland. Race therefore was not the sole barrier to a harmonious union on the regional level—so were class, intellectualism, and attitudes toward modernity and tradition.

Central Congregational Church, occupying the former home of the prestigious Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church at the corner of Ponce de Leon and Piedmont avenues, was, despite its deep commitments to free and liberal interpretations of the Christian faith and aggressive social concern, a product of the post-Reconstruction South. When AMA missionaries came to the city in the late 1860s to establish educational opportunities for the freed people, they insisted firmly upon racial inclusion in the founding of the First Congregational Church of Atlanta, located a mere several blocks away from where Central Church sat nearly a century afterward. But the two churches might as well have been continents away, as Central came into being in 1882 at the instigation of a different Congregational missionary organization that was rather (and shockingly so to our modern eyes) indifferent to the denomination's legacy of abolition and uplift of the freed slaves.

On top of that, one of the organization's operatives entered into apparently under-the-table negotiations with an existing Southern white denomination found almost entirely in the

rural country mentioned above, the Congregational Methodist Church. This staunchly “free-will” (on salvation, as opposed to Calvinist concepts of predestination) and morally strict group broke from the main body of Methodism about two generations earlier in protest against the centralized bureaucracy then thought to be infecting the previously free-range circuit-riding, highly fervent common life the faithful had once known. But the resulting schism left the group isolated and vulnerable, so some—not all by any means—of its leaders, quite a number of them veterans of the Confederacy, swallowed their pride and esteem for the Lost Cause and made common cause with—believe it or not—fast-talking Yankees. Before long, some of the churches dropped “Methodist” from their names and simply became “Congregational.” But there was no corresponding theological change to the liberal progressivism and belief that God dwelled inside human hearts that was then becoming the dominant note in Northern churches and Sunday Schools. At base, this was a rather blatant case of “sheep stealing” under false pretenses, since the vote taken in the CMC apparently was of dubious legality and in any case was engineered from above rather than having arisen from below. And one dubious consequence of this seeming fraud was that it took generations for members of CM-heritage churches to become aware of the denomination’s work among their sworn enemies, Southern blacks. When their great- and great-great-grandchildren found out generations later at about the same time the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision was handed down by the U.S. Supreme Court, the seeds were laid for serious conflict.

Put that together with a more geographically concentrated, tighter-knit group of stray “Christian Connection” churches in about a 30-mile radius along the Chattahoochee River and nearby areas in eastern central Alabama and western central Georgia, who had an almost identical origin to the Congregational Methodists but were usually more mission-minded, and a strong possibility for conservative revolt within an ostensibly liberal religious group came into being. While the minds of everyone were occupied in the late 1940s and early 1950s with a “return to religion and normality” and building churches to focus strongly upon evangelism to a vastly growing population, theological and cultural conflict would cool off significantly from the fundamentalist/modernist hatreds of earlier decades. But by the time of the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in November 1963, that calm and complacency had gone out the window, as African-Americans began to demand a share of the nation’s recent prosperity and a change in generations-old subordinate social standing. Also, Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson, initiated wars on two fronts, against Communism in Vietnam and poverty at home in the U.S. None of this was lost on the new UCC, with the new church joining in countless others in heartily demanding that white America cede some of its historic privileges to those of color who could otherwise not obtain decent wages, health, housing, and access to public services. But the UCC could not espouse these stands with any integrity while it still had a segregated judicatory within its bounds, one that had been preserved by past compromises. It had to go, as did churches that refused to discontinue segregated practices. So in Summer 1963 at the Fourth General Synod of the UCC in Denver, Colorado, delegates approved a measure instructing the denomination’s home mission board not to provide financial aid to churches that did not positively forbid racial discrimination in their membership policies.

For some years before then, a preacher, sometime evangelist, sometime farmer, and sometime schoolteacher by the name of W. C. Carpenter, based out of Tifton, Georgia, became the *enfant terrible* of segregationists in the SECNV. A flamboyant, semi-literate rabble-rouser who incorporated elements of old-time revivalism and demagoguery in his sermons and speeches, Carpenter made a personal crusade out of opposition to the “integrated, NAACP, leftist” UCC and CS churches (in his mind) polluting the pure Caucasian fellowship of the SECNV. With several of his ministerial colleagues, he rather ham-fistedly proclaimed his case, keying it to a previous cause of his to keep CM and Christian Connection-heritage churches in his part of South Georgia away from the influence of Central Church in Atlanta, Circular Congregational Church in Charleston, South Carolina, and other “liberal” congregations. But he stumbled considerably in recruiting people in his very own constituency, alienating as many people (if not more) than he attracted, by making diatribes against people for very minor slights against him, throwing temper tantrums about not getting his way in the Georgia-South Carolina Conference (Association) and SECNV meetings, and subverting local pastors’ work by means of gossip and manipulating laypeople to do his bidding.

Carpenter rallied his troops, so to speak, for the first vote at the April 1964 annual SECNV meeting at Pilgrim Congregational Church in Chattanooga. His side prevailed barely, 86 votes against to 75 in favor, due to the “woodwork” phenomenon of Carpenter “rounding up” segregation-minded churches who otherwise did not usually attend the annual Convention meeting, coming this year specifically for the purpose of stopping the union. However, even Carpenter could not stop a resolution to take up the matter again the following year, despite his complaints that the particular enabling vote was illegitimate. In that year-long interval, the sand underneath everyone’s feet shifted imperceptibly but decisively. Almost immediately, SECNV superintendent (the term for conference minister then) James “Jimmy” Lightbourne, Jr. began working with a number of key leaders to prepare the field for 1965. In a statesman-like fashion, he chose not to force the issue, but rather promote it as a necessary and beneficial improvement of the churches’ common life together. He declared his feeling that the CS and its 23 congregations in the region, despite the obvious blow to their good will in sustaining defeat and thus exposing the level of racism in the SECNV, would “stand by us and help us to work this thing through to the right kind of solution.” Lightbourne was, in all truth, openly praying for a miracle to occur over the next 11 months, either a change in heart of the conservatives or else increased interest on the part of the moderate/liberal faction of the SECNV. Either way, the Rev. Harold Long, pastor of Birmingham’s First Congregational Christian Church, moderator of the Alabama-Mississippi CS Conference, put his feelings (and clearly those of the other disappointed CS members) poignantly in a letter to Lightbourne on May 30, 1964: “My emotional reaction (to the failed 1964 vote) was one of emptiness. Surprisingly I reflected and realized that as a Negro American I was experiencing in the Church ... that which I had experienced in the world ... If the vote is unfavorable the next time I believe we ought to go ahead with those churches that are ready for an inclusive conference fellowship.”

On the E&R side, only one church, First Church in Nashville, dominated by fairly conservative Swiss-American businesspeople heavily invested in traditional Southern mores to

accomplish their experience of assimilation, expressed opposition to uniting with the SECNV. But its pastor-driven traditions neutralized such intransigence when the Rev. John Roemer came to the pastorate in 1964. Still, in rural Alabama and Georgia W. C. Carpenter would not relent in his tirades against Lightbourne and the SECNV Board of Directors, stoking fears among his followers that the Convention might take over certain church properties in retaliation for negative votes by their pastors and delegates. But Lightbourne and leaders like Millard Fuller, then starting a UCC congregation in Montgomery, Alabama, and Pressley Ingram, Convention moderator from Pilgrim Congregational Church in Birmingham, would not budge in the face of taunts and appeals to nostalgia for "good old days." Ingram put it this way in a letter to Lightbourne a few days after the 1964 failed vote: "We may split our church wide open, but from what I hear it is already split and we may as well try to go all out (in 1965)." While Lightbourne and the Board did not favor Ingram's idea of a special meeting before the end of 1964, there was still enough momentum from the razor-thin margin of defeat in that union opponents did not have a decisive mandate to declare the matter closed. With that in mind, Fuller, a few years before he gave up everything to go into the missionary work that led to him establishing Habitat for Humanity, and Lightbourne and a few courageous others went to work trying to persuade moderately conservative "bubble" churches in the SECNV, particularly those from Christian Connection heritage, to see the light.

So when the time rolled around for the 1965 Annual Meeting, delegates and fraternal representatives from the CS and E&R churches who stayed overnight in one of Atlanta's downtown or mid-town motels would have picked up the morning *Constitution* newspaper and read these headlines: "U.S., Viet Bombers Smash 7 Bridges" ... "U.S. Embassy In Paris Gets A Bomb Scare" ... "Cubans Arrest 8 As Spies for CIA" ... "(Lester) Maddox Says 25,000 May March" ... And the Saturday church section was just as turbulent: "Presbyterians Refuse to Issue Letter to Forbid Racial Bias" ... "Episcopalians Face Negro Issue" ... "A Warning from Pastor (Martin) Niemoeller." But readers would have been disappointed about picking up that particular copy, since there was no notice about the day's events due to the denomination's small size in the region. It was not until the printing later in the day of the *Constitution's* afternoon companion the *Journal* that the meeting was mentioned, and then only in three paragraphs, with the mention of the merger vote in the last paragraph making no reference whatsoever to the racial justice ramifications, as would have certainly been the case had the vote happened in our time. But that likely was not a problem with anyone, most of all Lightbourne, none of whom wanted undue media attention to the gathering anyway, for fear of disruption from outsiders.

In the late morning, all took their seats in the spacious sanctuary of Central Church for the usual preliminary formalities. Eleven CS fraternal representatives showed up, as did the pastors and representatives from all four of the E&R churches involved in the matter. This meeting was so crucial that UCC President Ben Herbster came down from New York City to speak. In what had to be tense and perhaps loud debate, opponents pressed for a secret ballot but did not prevail, but a request for a roll call vote did, so each delegate and clergy person's vote would be a matter of public record in the minutes.

A large percentage of the SECNV's constituency, it appeared, were either apathetic toward the issue or else presumed that their votes would not matter either way and stayed home, probably unlike the previous year. When the final tally was counted, 116 people voted in favor of the union, with 99 opposing and two declining to vote. Broken down into lay against clergy, 79 laypeople went in favor against 84 opposed, whereas 37 ministers voted "yes," 15 of them voted "no," and two of them abstained from voting. While that was another threadbare margin, there was no provision in the SECNV constitution for a supermajority requirement on organizational measures, and the union was declared in effect. The minutes did not record any sort of a celebration, just a simple statement from the Resolutions Committee saying "We rejoice in the affirmative vote of the convention in accepting the report of the Committee on Realignment and anticipate the early formulation of a new Southeast Conference ..."

The words of a delegate and a visitor from United Church of Huntsville, Alabama, John Heaman and Phil Woodbury, respectively, captured the mood and aftermath better than the official records, in any case. Heaman said, "I will long recall ... the gloom and dismay of many at us at noon when we saw that a record number had attended—for the purpose, we assumed, of defeating the issue ... the inspired presentation by Rev. (Raymond) Berry (coincidentally Heaman and Woodbury's pastor) of the proposal ... a presentation that held the delegation spellbound and materially affected the outcome of the vote ... the whisper of Dr. Lightbourne that '(the vote) carried' and my pessimistic thinking that I had misunderstood him ... the feeling that, for a fleeting, passing moment, Rev. Carpenter saw and realized the work of the Lord." Woodbury concurred with his friend Heaman, decrying "the nearsightedness of the arch-segregationists (slamming) the door to progressive Christianity ... I would like to think that the vote taken this past weekend in favor of a Southeast Conference ... represented a change of heart, a growing in Christian morality, and I believe this to be true for many who had previously voted 'nay.' But I think it would be most dangerous for us to be less than realistic. (The vote) indicates to me only that there were more people at the convention in favor of the proposal ..."

After the delegates went home the following afternoon after the Sunday worship service and meal, Carpenter and other conservatives tried desperately to prove questionable legality on the vote. But they were Christian enough to follow Paul's admonitions in the sixth chapter of 1 Corinthians not to press a civil suit to stop the union, and they chose instead to either separate entirely from the new SEC or stop participating via benevolence giving and meeting attendance. That still left, however, around 70 to 80 other conservative congregations who stayed in simply to maintain old fellowship ties with churches nearby to them. Things would eventually calm down by the mid-1970s into the 1980s, but the 1990s would bring a new series of controversies, mostly concerning human sexuality, that eventually by the 2000s gutted most if not all the churches who opposed the SEC's creation in 1965. But no one foresaw that occurrence during that spring weekend in Atlanta, with the only real disappointment in later months being Lightbourne's move back to his home territory, the new Southern Conference, as its first-ever executive. The next year at First E&R Church in Nashville, the Annual Meeting

chose as Lightbourne's successor one of the old Southern Convention's statesman pastors, the Rev. William J. "Bill" Andes, the man who would have to begin the arduous task of balancing the strongly enthusiastic liberal and moderate white, and the new African-American, churches' needs against those of the wary and suspicious rural white conservative fellowships, most of whom were not really sold on the new SECUCC.

That task took the better part of 40 years, running through three successors to Andes, rendering the April 24, 1965 vote somewhat pyrrhic. At the end of his memoirs, John Heaman spoke of a spirit of optimism in the task by postulating, "The immediate challenge of the Conference is to retain and regain these churches ... they are a part of our heritage. We not only want them, we need them." But, unfortunately, what happened in the years to come was an ultimately futile expenditure of countless time and resources on trying to accommodate incompatible viewpoints on theology, worship, and attitudes toward society by meetings, programs, and special staffing, diverting those limited goods from growth-oriented work like church planting and theological training for pastors unable to obtain graduate education. It even led to promises to the African-American churches not being kept. With the benefit of hindsight, some people would go so far as to say that it should have never happened and amounted to a grand waste of decades and money. And they would not be entirely wrong—but neither are they entirely right. The attitude of Raymond Berry seemed to sum up the fragile but determined consensus that came out of Atlanta, in these words: "The days ahead will not be easy, but neither will they be so arid and suffocating. The ostrich has raised her head out of the sand!"

To those of us today who enjoy the great fellowship and mission of the Southeast Conference of the UCC, we must recall our origins in the great cultural and theological struggle that forged our identity in the days of our grandparents. In many ways, we can proudly say that diversity is a "family tradition." More to the point, though, our unity in Christ has, to quote one stanza of the great hymn "Amazing Grace," "brought (us safe thus far, and grace will lead us home."

